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The Badr Organization

Iran's Most Important Instrument in Iraq

Guido Steinberg

Since 2014, the Shiite Badr Organization, led by its Secretary General Hadi al-Amiri, has become one of the main actors in Iraqi politics. This development was largely possible due to the successes of its paramilitary units in the fight against the Islamic State (IS). The Badr Organization, which relies strongly on support from Tehran, has thus become the most important instrument of Iranian politics in its neighbouring country. Tehran's aim is to exert as much influence as possible on the central government in Baghdad and, at the same time, build a strong militia that depends on it. Since Badr established control over the province of Diyala and the Interior Ministry of Baghdad, the organization has grown appreciably and is now playing a role similar to that of Hezbollah in Lebanon. Badr is also part of a growing "Shiite International" which supports the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria and aggravates religious conflicts between Sunnites and Shiites through its violent acts. The combination of these factors makes the organization an increasingly important obstacle to the future stabilization of Iraq.

The Badr Organization's militia is playing an important role in fighting around the Iraqi city of Mosul. As the dominant part of the People's Mobilization Forces (PMF), it has taken on the task of cutting the lines connecting Islamic State (IS) in Iraq with its bases in Syria. Originally, it had wanted to participate in the attack on Mosul, but the US government made its military support to Iraq dependent on Shiite militias being banned from the city. Although Baghdad has followed this wish, it is not yet guaranteed that PMF units will remain under their control now that Mosul has been liberated. Until July 2017, however, they limited

themselves to operating west of Mosul and fighting IS in the city of Tal Afar.

From Badr Corps to Badr Organization

The Badr Organization is the oldest Shiite militia in Iraq and has maintained the closest ties to Iran. The unit was founded as the Badr Corps in 1983/84, the armed wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). It was an organization made up of Iraqi exiles who fled to Iran when the regime of Saddam Hussein intensified its persecution of Shiites in

1979. The leader of the Corps was the cleric Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim (1939–2003) whose family still dominates the Supreme Council today.

From the very start, the Badr Corps was a subunit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqelab-e Eslami or Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution), Iran's political army. This army, which exists in parallel with conventional forces, is responsible for protecting and spreading the Islamic Revolution. The Iraqis are assigned to the Quds (= Jerusalem) Brigades of the Revolutionary Guards who are responsible for political, military and intelligence relations with Iran's Muslim neighbours in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. The Quds Brigades maintain contact with all the pro-Iranian militant groups operating in these countries, such as the Lebanese Hezbollah and Badr.

The Badr Corps continued to exist after the Iran-Iraq War and remained part of the Revolutionary Guards. In the wake of the American invasion of 2003, Badr troops also marched into Iraq. The Badr Corps, which from then on called itself the Badr Organization, retained its paramilitary units, but also claimed a place in Baghdad politics and cooperated pragmatically with occupation forces. At the same time, it retained close ties to Iran. Initially, the Badr Organization stood in the shadow of its (political) parent organization. The Supreme Council was Iran's most important partner in Baghdad politics for several years and Badr politicians generally represented the Supreme Council. Although it moved into politics, there are indications that the Badr Organization, at least indirectly, fought against US troops. In 2007, the (former) Badr commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis founded the Kata'ib Hezbollah (Hezbollah battalions) which opposed the Americans militarily with Iranian support. Muhandis claimed he left Badr in 2003, but there has been no evidence of disagreement or even conflict. Rather, Kata'ib Hezbollah maintains closer ties with Badr than any other militia. Its strong connection to the Revolutionary

Guards and its religious-political allegiance to the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei also suggest that a break never occurred.

The founding of Kata'ib Hezbollah was instead part of a dual strategy that Iran pursues in Iraq to this day. Firstly, Tehran supported its Iraqi allies, the Supreme Council and Badr, politically and helped them to obtain and maintain durable positions of power, also by cooperating with the US. Secondly, it promoted the establishment of new militias which fought against US troops in order to force them to withdraw. A major change took place in May 2007, when the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq was renamed the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) whilst, at the same time, distancing itself from Iran. This development gave the Badr Organization the opportunity to establish itself as Iran's most important ally in Iraq. In 2009, it officially parted from the Supreme Council and joined the (rival) State of Law Coalition formed by the then Prime Minister, Nuri al-Maliki. Badr leader Hadi al-Amiri was rewarded with the post of Minister of Transport in December 2010 and Badr won 22 out of 328 seats in the 2014 elections. However, the organization only made its breakthrough in Iraqi politics in 2014 when Shiite militias, led by Badr, took up the fight against IS. Badr and Kata'ib Hezbollah were now working hand in hand and assumed leadership of the PMF, founded in the same year.

The Badr Organization

Ideology and objectives

The Badr Organization is a Shiite Islamist group, that adheres to the ideology of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–1989) and, therefore, to the state ideology of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The objective of this doctrine, also known as the 'rule of the religious jurist' (Arabic: wilayat al-faqih), is to establish an Islamic state which, in the absence of the twelfth Imam al-Mahdi, is ruled by a religious scholar. After the Islamic

Revolution in 1979, Khomeini himself initially held the position of what Iranians named “Supreme Leader”, followed by Ali Khamenei in 1989.

For the Badr Organization and its members, the Iranian Supreme Leader is the highest religious and political authority, as Hadi al-Amiri has repeatedly confirmed. Indeed, Amiri presents himself as a Shiite internationalist for whom the cohesion of the Shiite Muslim community under Iranian leadership is more important than the integrity of the Iraqi national state. In the event of a conflict, therefore, it can be assumed that Amiri and the Badr Organization would follow Khamenei’s instructions rather than those of the Iraqi Prime Minister.

The close alliance of the Badr Organization with Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guards has never been without its problems. Many Iraqis, including Shias, are critical of these ties to the Iranian leadership. As a result of this criticism, the Iraqi Islamic Supreme Council has, at least publicly, played down its relationship with Iran, a step that Badr never took. Badr has, however, tried to emphasize its Iraqi character. Indeed, it named its military wing after the scholar and intellectual Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (1935–1980). In the late 1950s, Sadr was one of the founders and leaders of the Daawa Party, currently the oldest and most important Shiite political organization in Iraq. Sadr himself never adopted Khomeini’s teachings of the ‘rule of the religious jurist’. Therefore, the fact that the Iran-supporting Badr Organization prominently acts on Sadr’s authority, reflects its efforts to obtain an Iraqi face.

Accordingly, there are no indications of any disagreements or conflicts between the Iraqi organization and Khamenei’s power apparatus. As a result, Badr should be considered an instrument of Iranian politics in Iraq. The Quds Brigades of the Revolutionary Guards, under the command of Major General Qasem Soleimani, are primarily responsible for its practical implementation. They are solely under the command of the Supreme Leader, not the Iranian gov-

ernment. Since Badr has become Iran’s closest ally in Iraq, it is also the most important exponent of the Iranian project to establish an (Islamic) state within a state, modelled on Hezbollah in Lebanon. It is predestined for such a function since it controls parts of Diyala and Salah al-Din provinces. It also plays a role in Tehran’s efforts of exercising as much political influence as possible in Baghdad. Due to its role in the fight against IS, the organization and its leader currently enjoy a great degree of popularity and, as a direct consequence, wield influence in the Iraqi government. In addition to Badr, the Iranian leadership has built other alliances with Baghdad, in particular with the Supreme Council.

Badr’s objectives are no longer limited exclusively to Iraq. It sent militias to Syria because, together with the Revolutionary Guards, the organization is keen to see the Assad regime, an ally of the Islamic Republic and an important supporter of the Lebanese Hezbollah, remain in power in Syria.

Leadership and power base

The Badr Organization is led by Hadi al-Amiri who serves as Secretary General. Amiri, born in 1954, took part in the war against Iraq on the Iranian side and was appointed military commander of the Badr Corps in the 1990s. Between 2003 and 2010, he became a well-known figure in Iraqi politics and assumed political leadership of the group after it was renamed Badr Organization (also in 2003). However, until 2009, when Badr was generally considered part of the Supreme Council, Amiri remained somewhat in the shadows. This only changed after it separated from its parent organization and formed an alliance with Prime Minister Maliki. Amiri and his supporters used his position as Transport Minister (which he held until September 2014) and the ministry’s budget to strengthen their own organization.

The founding of the PMF in June 2014 marked a turning point in Amiri’s career. He gave up his ministerial office and be-

came the military leader of Badr again. At the same time, Amiri assumed command of the PMF, together with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis of the Kata'ib Hezbollah and Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Brigades. Badr was additionally strengthened as Maliki, just before he was forced to give up his office in September 2014, made Amiri the unofficial military governor of the province of Diyala, north-east of Baghdad. As a result, Amiri had supreme command over the army and all the security forces in the province which, from February 2015, was almost completely controlled by Badr. In May 2015, Badr politician Muthanna al-Tamimi became the governor of Diyala, although Shiites constituted, at least until recently, the region's minority. In the provinces of Diyala and Salah al-Din, Badr used this method to create a territorial basis. This distinguishes Badr from all other Shiite militia in Iraq and will, if the situation continues, make the organization a particularly important player in the long term.

The Badr Organization's second power base is the Iraqi Interior Ministry. When Amiri left the Ministry of Transport in September 2014, he was able to appoint Badr official Muhammad al-Ghabban as Interior Minister. Amiri would have assumed office but, according to the Badr Organization, the US government prevented him from doing so. Nevertheless, the Badr leader is considered the real strong man in the Interior Ministry. The importance of controlling the Interior Ministry had already been demonstrated in 2005. At that time, Badr official Bayan Jabr al-Saulagh (still a representative of the Supreme Council at the time) became Interior Minister. He immediately ensured that Badr officials took control of the police and security services and that thousands of militia officers were hired. In the ensuing civil war (2006–2007), the ministry's security forces operated with Shiite militia and committed numerous crimes against prisoners and the Sunni civilian population. While Saulagh lost his position in 2006, Badr's staff remained well represented in

the ministry and its subordinate authorities. This is the main reason for the catastrophic reputation of the Iraqi police forces in the Sunni areas of the country. For Badr, the ministry remained an important power base on which the organization would continue to build from 2014 onwards. In July 2016, following a devastating attack in Baghdad, Interior Minister Ghabban had to resign and, in January 2017, was replaced by Badr official Qasim al-Araji.

The military wing

The Badr Organization has had a separate military wing since 2003 called the Forces of the martyr Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr or Martyr Sadr Forces for short (Quwwat al-Shahid al-Sadr).

Even in the 1980s, the number of fighters in the Badr combat units was usually claimed to be more than 10,000 men. After 2003, many authors have repeated this figure which must be a rough estimate. Indeed, after moving to the police and other security services, foreign observers were no longer able to clearly identify thousands of Badr fighters. In addition, the Badr Organization maintains paramilitary units independent of the state authorities. This became clear in 2013 when the organization was able to set up strong units in Syria and – a year later – the PMF was established in Iraq. In 2014, the Badr Organization claimed to count more than 10,000 armed men in its ranks. Their number is likely to have risen since then as the militia recruited thousands of young men for the fight against IS, and it was able to further strengthen itself while securing its control over the Interior Ministry. Independent sources now estimate their number at 20,000 men, but the organization claims to have reached approximately 50,000 members. Both figures could be correct if one distinguishes between the necessarily smaller number of fighters (and thus the members of the military wing) and the higher number of other personnel (the political movement/party) or auxiliary forces that can also be mobilized

rapidly. Paramilitaries in the Badr Organization continue to be closely linked to Iran. Some of their fighters are still trained at the Revolutionary Guard camps in Iran, whose trainers are often members of the Lebanese Hezbollah. Since 2014, the Badr units are more likely to train in Iraq because they have experienced a strong influx of recruits and have built up their own infrastructure. Overall, due to support from the Revolutionary Guards and the Iraqi government, which has been trying to expand its influence over the PMF militia since 2014, the military wing of Badr is well trained and equipped. Its fighters usually appear in uniforms and their arms are mostly more modern than those of other militias. The Badr militia possesses many heavy weapons, armoured troop carriers and tanks. Particularly prominent are the IRAMs (Improvised Rocket-Assisted Mortars) which the civilian population fears for their lack of accuracy.

With the PMF in Iraq

The Badr Organization owes its rise to the People's Mobilization Force militia alliance (Arabic: al-Hashd al-Sha'bi), in which it represents the dominant force. This alliance was formed in the summer of 2014 in response to the IS offensive in Iraq. The initial triumphs of the jihadists demonstrated that the Iraqi army could not fight them alone and was in dire need of reinforcement.

Prime Minister Maliki, a Badr ally, took the initiative. Only one day after IS conquered Mosul on 10 June, he called for a 'reserve army' to be mobilized. Two days later, Shiite scholar Ayatollah Ali Sistani issued a fatwa calling for a 'holy war' (jihad) against the Sunni jihadists. The response was overwhelming: tens of thousands young Shiite men volunteered in the subsequent days and weeks.

Badr is only one of the many organizations that have been active for years or even decades and were able, in 2014, to acquire new recruits. Most members of the approximately 40 to 50 groups – and up to 100,000

fighters – were Shiites. Even though additional militias were established around that time, the Badr Organization, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (League of Righteous), Kata'ib Hezbollah and Saraya al-Salam (Peace Companies), all of which existed long before the founding of the PMF, dominated the new alliance.

Among these four, the Badr Organization stands out because it is the closest ally of the Revolutionary Guards who have a profound influence on the activities of the PMF. The militia alliance is nominally led by Kata'ib-Hezbollah commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, also a close ally of Badr and the Revolutionary Guard. Hadi al-Amiri, however, is regarded as the real strong man behind Muhandis and appears in public as such. The third member of the PMF triumvirate is Qasem Soleimani.

Having control over the Interior Ministry and the police has allowed Badr to lead the PMF. The Iraqi government, under Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi, is trying to bring the militias under state control; to this end, the People's Mobilization Committee was set up in 2014 and chaired by National Security Advisor Falih al-Fayyad. But the committee was not able to assert itself against Amiri, Soleimani and Muhandis. The Interior Ministry, under Badr's command, formally controls the militias which the government supports with money and weapons. Instead of establishing state control, the organization has access to enormous finances which make it even more independent of the government. The imposing magnitude of its finances – the PMF's budget was estimated at around one billion dollars in 2015 and 1.5 billion in 2016 – is proof of Badr's growing power.

How little Badr cares about the wishes of its partners in Baghdad was shown in the offensive against the IS stronghold of Falluja in May 2016. The Shiite militia was not supposed to participate in the attack, under US pressure and a corresponding order from the government in Baghdad. However, during combat operations Badr's leader Amiri announced that no one could

prevent the PMF from advancing on Falluja. Indeed, during the month of June, the 4th brigade of the Badr Organization took part in the fight and remained in the city afterwards.

The strength and independence of Badr's units are particularly problematic because they were guilty of numerous crimes during and after military operations. Immediately after fighting with IS, these acts were often committed in revenge for the lives of Shiite militiamen who had become victims of the terrorist organization. However, even the slightest suspicion was usually sufficient to commit serious crimes against the local Sunni population. This included, for example, the inhabitants of Tikrit, an IS stronghold. In March 2015, when government forces and the militia seized the town, thousands of Sunni civilians were executed, many of them at the hands of Badr forces. Moreover, the Badr Organization has repeatedly tried to prevent the return of fleeing Sunni Iraqis by destroying their houses and even entire villages.

With the Revolutionary Guards in Syria

The Badr Organization is heavily involved in the Syrian civil war. Under the leadership of several hundred military advisors sent by the Revolutionary Guards and the Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi and Afghan militias have been fighting alongside Bashar al-Assad's troops against Sunni insurgents since the winter of 2011/2012. No later than spring 2013, Badr sent an expeditionary force to Syria as well.

The most important reason for the Iranian, Lebanese, Iraqi and Afghan support is the alliance between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Assad regime which has been in place since 1980. However, the escalating conflict between Shiites and Sunnis and the related internationalist mindset play a significant role, also. It is less about the Alawite minority in Syria, which most Shiites (rightly) regard as a heretic sect, extrinsic to their denomination. Rather, the

Badr Organization has engaged in the war to support Hezbollah who would hardly be able to maintain control in Lebanon without Syrian supplies. Moreover, as Syrian government troops have had personnel problems since 2012, Iraqi support has become increasingly important.

In the beginning, the Iraqi contingents that formed the core of the Shia militia presence in Syria together with Lebanese Hezbollah units were known as the Abu Fadl al-Abbas Brigade (Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas). At that time, most Iraqi fighters appear to have been sent by Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah. The most important motivation for their presence was to protect sacred Shiite sites and, in particular, the Sayyida Zainab Mosque in the south of Damascus. Zainab Bint Ali (625–682), the Prophet's granddaughter and daughter of the first Shiite Imam, is believed to be buried in this shrine which has become increasingly popular among Shiite pilgrims since the 1980s. Many Shiites fear that Sunni terrorists could destroy the mosque. Indeed, in 2012, the majority of Shiite militiamen were deployed to the area around the Sayyida Zainab Mosque, where primarily Shiites reside. However, the fighters extended their radius of influence further and became active as far north as Aleppo.

Until spring 2013, Shiite militias were officially trying to deemphasize their presence in Syria. The situation changed when the city of Qusair was retaken by the regime in April and May, as thousands of Lebanese Hezbollah fighters were involved in the operation. Following this success, General Secretary Hasan Nasallah publicly acknowledged the presence of his organization in Syria. Until then, the Badr Organization had denied sending units to the neighbouring country, but, starting in July, it followed Hezbollah's lead and announced that it had stationed troops in Syria. As a consequence, the Forces of the Martyr Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (Quwwat al-Shahid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr), Badr's expeditionary unit, began publishing pictures

and videos of their activities in Syria with increasing frequency.

Badr units participated in numerous armed confrontations during the Syrian civil war. In 2013, they were mainly stationed in Damascus and fought in the Sayyida Zainab area. From the beginning of 2014, Badr units were seen in the Qalamun Mountains north of Damascus near the Lebanese border, one of the major Hezbollah areas of operations. In March they participated in battles around the city of Yabrud. Their presence in this region is a clear indication of the particularly close cooperation between Badr and their Lebanese counterpart.

An estimated 1,000 to 1,500 Badr fighters are thought to have been deployed in Syria between 2013 and 2014, with an estimated overall capacity of around 3,000 to 5,000 Iraqi militiamen. In 2014, large numbers of Iraqi fighters, including militiamen of the Badr Organization, were relocated back to Iraq to fight against IS. In autumn 2015, the number of Iraqi volunteers in Syria rose again since the Iranian leadership wanted to support the visibly weakened Syrian army. There is ample evidence that the Badr Organization was fighting in Syria in 2016, also. Indeed, Badr strengthened its units further when the battle for Aleppo intensified during that same year.

Rising tensions in Iraq and the region

In Iraq, the Badr Organization is well on its way to establishing a state within a state that is dependent on Iran. Badr controls Diyala, a territory that could easily be expanded into an independent power base. Since it controls the Interior Ministry, the organization is an important actor in Iraqi politics, also.

This hampers Abadi's efforts to integrate the militias into the country's armed forces and, thereby, bring them under governmental control. In February 2016, the government decreed that the PMF militia should become an independent part of the

Iraqi armed forces while remaining under the authority of the Prime Minister as commander-in-chief. On 26 November, the Iraqi Parliament passed a law supporting the official decree. There has been, however, no indication that these measures were successful and actually limited their independence. It follows that Badr (and the other major militias) could prevent the stabilization of the Iraqi state while dramatically influencing the country's politics, also.

Nevertheless, from October 2016 onwards, the government has had some success in the offensive against Mosul. With US support, Abadi prevented Badr and its partners from participating in the fight for the city and deployed the militias west of the Nainawa province, towards the Syrian border. This step was particularly important for the offensive's long-term success. Indeed, had Badr invaded the predominantly Sunni city of Mosul and committed its usual acts of revenge, resentment among the local population might have provoked serious conflicts in the future. The events of Falluja in May 2016 demonstrated, however, that Badr and its allies were still able to enter the city shortly after it had been seized. In addition, the militia operated in the west of Mosul and focused on the city of Tal Afar which they had not succeeded in taking by July 2017. In this sense, the risk that the militia's attacks could inflame the local Sunni population against the central government is still acute.

The prominence of the militias in general, and of the Badr Organization in particular, threatens to fuel the broader conflict between Sunnis and Shiites, also. In particular groups such as the Sunni IS and its predecessors have been seeking, since 2003, confrontations with the Shiites and inflicted terrible acts of violence on them. However, Badr and the Shiite militia have also committed serious crimes aimed at driving out Sunni civilians from the areas in the north and the north-east of Baghdad. Moreover, Badr's efforts are committed to securing the rule of Shiite Islamists in the whole of Iraq, to which also the Sunnis should submit.

Accordingly, they fuelled the conflict between the various religious and ethnic groups in the country.

The militant quest for leadership is problematic beyond Iraq, too. The Badr Organization, which is already operating in Syria, has threatened to invade eastern Syria, if necessary, to fight IS there. Some policy observers read this development as part of an Iranian attempt to form a land bridge between the Shia territories in Iraq, western Syria and Lebanon. In any case, Badr fighters gained valuable military experience through the conflict against IS in Iraq and were able to establish new and even closer relations with other Shiite groups. Even though it is still unclear whether they will start operating outside Iraq and Syria, Sunni states are watching the gradual formation of an international Shiite militia under Iranian leadership with a great deal of suspicion. The Badr Organization is a key player in the region's political and military landscape and one of the main reasons for the escalation of regional tensions between the Iranian camp and its opponents.

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